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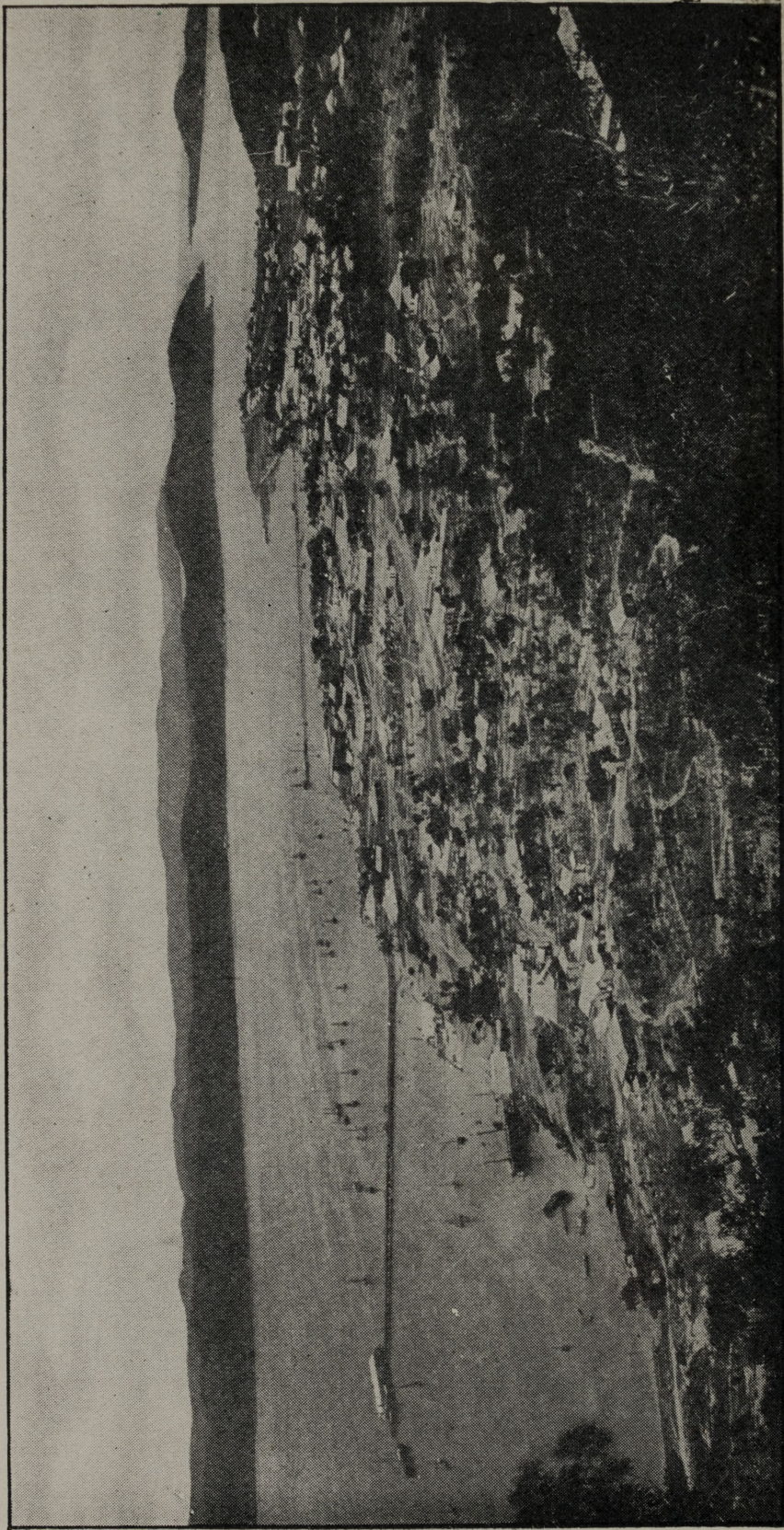
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Toilers of the Reef.





Thursday Island.



WHITCOMBE'S STORY BOOKS

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# Toilers of the Reef

BY

FRANK REID

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# Toilers of the Reef.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE GIANT SHELL.

In a small tent, erected just above high-water mark on one of the remote beaches of the North Queensland coast, Will Thompson and Vernon Sinclair sat on two rough camp stools, at a table equally rough. The ocean, violently agitated by a recent storm, was thundering along the shore, while the wind, sighing through the dense mangrove forest at their back, was executing a high-pitched accompaniment.

Will Thompson's father was a pearler, and his two sturdy fishing luggers were now out on the fringe of the Great Barrier Reef, searching for the valuable mother-of-pearl shell from which our shirt buttons, penknife handles, and many other things are made. Vernon Sinclair, Will's cousin, was a Melbourne boy, who had come North to spend a three months' holiday with his uncle and aunt, in their home near Cape York.

Two days prior to the opening of this story, they had left Will's home in a small boat, with the intention of camping out for a week on Grand Shaggy Point. This was a noted spot for sea-shells, and, as Vernon wished to take a collection back with him to Melbourne, he was full of eagerness to finish



breakfast, and search the weed-strewn beach for rare shells which may have been washed off the coral reefs during the storm.

Ten minutes later, the two boys were walking slowly along the beach. Every now and then, Will upturned a lump of weed or sponge with a long stick. Vernon had been searching for cowries amongst the rocks which fringed the water-line. Presently he called out excitedly:

"Will, come here at once! I have found such a big shell. Why, it is almost as large as a small boat!"

Will threw away a large piece of dried sponge he had been examining, and hastened across to his cousin's side. At their feet lay a huge cockle-shaped shell, which measured about three feet six inches in length.

"It is a Giant Clam," said Will. "They inhabit the deeper waters between the mainland and the Barrier Reef. Here they lie on the surface of the reef, and are generally so thickly covered with corals, sponges, and other marine growths, that their real identity is almost completely disguised."

"Are they of any value?" asked Vernon.

"Well, no," replied Will. "At times Japanese Beche-de-mer fishermen bring them to Thursday Island or Cooktown, and sell them for decorating gardens and verandahs. Some years ago, too, three men landed near our house, gathered the Clams lying on the beach, and burned them, so as to make lime."

"I suppose this is a full-sized specimen?" said Vernon.

"Oh, dear, no!" laughed his cousin. "Why! It



was only a few years back that a pearler came into Cooktown and said that his divers had seen two big Clams when they were searching for pearl-shell. They were over ten feet in length, and each weighed about a ton."

"A shell like that would be rather large to add to my collection," laughed Vernon.

"Yes, but there is a smaller species, called the Spotted or Bear's-foot Clam," said Will. "I will get you a few of them when the tide goes out. They are very plentiful in the shallow water near the point, and, of course, they are not so dangerous as the larger species."

"Why, is there danger attached to the Giant Clam?"

"I should just think there is," said Will. "Divers are always afraid of them. Covered as they are with marine growths, they lie with their gaping valves wide open. If a diver happens to place his foot between the shelly jaws, it is held with a grip as firm and unyielding as that of the strongest steel man-trap. Unless the assistance of another diver, armed with a stout knife, or crowbar, is at hand, the victim stands little or no chance of escaping a watery grave."

"How terrible!" said Vernon, with a shudder. "Have you ever known a diver to lose his life in this way?"

"Yes," replied Will. "Father had an aboriginal named Darawan, who used to dive for shell in shallow water before the diving suit was brought here. One day, he went out alone in a small boat. As he did not return at dusk, Father and two other natives



went out, in the lugger, to search for him. They found Darawan's boat anchored over a shallow reef, but there was no sign of the aboriginal. The two blacks in the lugger dived overboard, and they found Darawan, lying on a bed of seaweed. He had placed his foot in an open Clam, and it had closed on his limb."

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Vernon. "How he must have struggled!"

"Yes," replied his cousin, "but his death was speedy, and not so terrible as that of other aboriginals who have placed a foot in the gigantic shell when they were wading in a shallow pool. Those poor fellows watched death approaching slowly, with the rising of the tide."

"There are, certainly, many dangerous creatures on the coral reefs," said Vernon. "We never hear about them in the city. I thought the octopus was the only thing in these waters that pearl-divers feared."

"Well, Father has been pearling in these waters for the past twenty-five years, and he has never heard of a diver being killed by an octopus," said Will. "The Japanese divers, who go down into very deep water, have often seen the hideous creatures in coral caverns, but they are never molested by them."

"What does the octopus live on, Will?" asked Vernon.

"It crawls clammily about the bottom of the sea, and drags itself along by its quivering, clutching arms which stick to everything they touch. Like the shark, it is a scavenger, and eats anything that



comes in its way. Divers have seen very large fish in its clutches."

"And I suppose it has its enemies?"

"Yes," exclaimed Will. "As it has no armor, or even bones, it falls a ready prey to fish large enough to withstand the pressure of its clutching arms, and the onslaught of its tearing beak. Father once caught a big cod which had only recently swallowed a fair-sized octopus."

"What wonderful stories I shall be able to tell my chums when I go back to Melbourne!" said Vernon. "They will hardly believe me when I tell them about the Giant Clams."

"Oh! you will see many other wonderful creatures before you return," replied Will. "Now, we must hurry along. The tide is going out fast, and you will soon be able to get several nice shells."

## CHAPTER II.

### CREATURES OF THE REEF.

The two boys had left the coral-strewn beach behind them, and were working their way across the slippery coral boulders which had been covered with water only a few hours previously. Presently, Will stopped beside a shallow pool. Here, among the branches of the corals, like birds among trees, floated many beautiful fish, radiant with colors. Seen through the clear crystal water, the ripple of which gave motion and quick play of light and shadow to the whole, the bottom of the pool formed a scene of rare beauty.

Floating lazily on the surface of the pool were



several balloon-shaped jelly-fish. Will touched one of them with a stick, and it drifted slowly toward a clump of weed that grew by the side of the pool.

"There is another dangerous creature, as many bathers in these waters have found out to their sorrow," said Will.

"What! that harmless-looking thing!" exclaimed Vernon, in a surprised voice. "What harm can it do?"

"Well, if you were swimming in that pool, and the creature touched any part of your body, the pain that you would experience would be very severe. It is commonly called the Portuguese Man-o'-War. Only a few years ago, two boys died near Townsville after some of these jelly-fish had touched their legs."

"Why, I can see right through them," exclaimed Vernon. "They seem to be full of water."

"Yes, that's right, and if you placed one of them on the beach, it would dissolve into water in a few hours," replied Will. "However, turtles feed very freely on the creatures, and often are nearly blinded by its stings."

"Well, Will, I think we will leave such dangerous creatures alone and look for shells," said Vernon.

Presently, the two boys were throwing big boulders to one side, and under these they found several cowries and other beautiful shells. Vernon had brought a canvas bag with him, and in this bag he placed his marine treasures. It was after both boys had thrown a very large boulder to one side, that Vernon pointed to several repulsive-looking creatures that were shaped like cucumbers.



"What are these ugly-looking things?" he cried.

"Ah! now you are looking at one of the most valuable products of the Barrier Reef," said Will. "That is Beche-de-mer, or Trepang, as the Japanese call it. Of course, there are several species, and some are more valuable than others. Those you are looking at now are not worth anything; but, if you had a lugger and several aboriginal divers, and went out to deeper water, you would find what is called Teat-fish and Red-fish. These are very valuable, and, when cured, are sold for as much as £300 a ton."

"But what are they used for?" exclaimed Vernon.

"They are highly appreciated by the Chinese, who make a very nourishing soup out of them. The native divers get the Beche-de-mer in anything from three to eight fathoms of water, and, where it is abundant, a man will bring up eight or ten at a time. When a sufficient quantity has been collected, the lugger returns to what is called the curing station. Here, the Beche-de-mer is placed in large iron tanks, and boiled for twenty minutes. They are then split down on one side with a long, sharp-pointed knife, and stretched open by strips of bamboo. They are now dried in the sun, until the greater part of the moisture has evaporated, and then they are collected and transferred to the smoke-house. By this time, they look like charred sausages, and are placed in bags ready for export."

"Are the valuable kinds much larger than these?" exclaimed Vernon.

"Oh! yes," replied Will. "Sometimes, divers bring up creatures that measure three feet in length, but, when they are boiled and smoked, they shrink to



about six inches. You will see that a very large number is required to weigh a ton."

"The Chinese certainly have queer tastes," exclaimed Vernon. "I've read about their eating puppy-dogs and the nests of certain birds, but just imagine them making soup out of such a nasty-looking creature. I wonder how they found out it was good for eating?"

"That I cannot tell you," said Will. "The Malays, from Macassar, fished in these waters for Beche-de-mer long before Captain Cook landed on our shores, so the Chinese must have known its value hundreds of years ago."

"Well, it's a pity they don't eat sharks or crocodiles," laughed Vernon. "We could easily spare such dangerous creatures."

"But the Chinese do eat shark," answered Will. "At least, they eat the fins and tail. When these are cured and dried, they are readily bought in the Chinese market, and soups are made richer by the addition of a shark's fin boiled to a jelly."

"Oh! look at that funny-looking fish swimming amongst the seaweed," cried Vernon. "If I had a small net I could easily catch it."

"That is a toad-fish, and it is very poisonous," replied Will. "Beche-de-mer fishermen often place dead toad-fish in boats infested with rats, and, before many days, the rats are all dead."

"I believe I've seen boys catch them with a pin-hook, attached to a few yards of thread," said Vernon. "When they are landed they puff themselves out, don't they?"

"Yes, but this is a larger species than you see in



Victorian waters, and it sometimes grows to a length of twelve inches," replied Will. "When I was at Townsville, last year, I saw several boys rubbing toad-fish on the ground, so that they would inflate themselves. Then they dropped big stones on the unfortunate fish, so that the sudden bursting of the creatures would make loud reports."

"That was very cruel," said Vernon.

"Yes, so it was," answered Will. "As the fish will not injure anyone, if left alone, I do not see why boys should injure it in any way. No doubt, like all of God's creatures, it was placed in the sea for some purpose.

As Vernon had secured several fine shells, the boys decided to return to their camp for lunch; but, every few seconds, Vernon's observant eyes noticed some peculiar shell or piece of seaweed, that lay amongst the coral. Of course, he stopped his cousin to find out what it was, and he was astonished at the amount of marine life that was to be seen after the tide had gone out. As Will explained, these little sea folk would have to wait for the incoming tide before they could regain their own free element again. Close to the camp, Vernon picked up a large curved shell, and, as he was examining it, his cousin, who had been chasing a large crab, came to his side.

"Hullo!" he said, "so you have found a Nautilus shell! There is no fish within it, I see, and it has become bleached through lying in the sun. We very rarely see a living Nautilus, as the creature lives in very deep water. When father takes you out in his lugger, you might be able to persuade one of the Japanese divers to bring a living specimen to the



surface. The natives on several of the islands in Torres Strait dive for the creature, as the flesh is said to be very good eating."

"Why! its surface looks just like porcelain," said Vernon.

"Yes," answered Will, "and if you break the shell with a stone you will find many little rooms within. Each of these is separated from the other by little walls composed of the same substance as the shell. Every one of these little rooms has, in turn, been the residence of the fish, and has been abandoned as the creature grew too large for it."

Vernon placed the shell in his canvas bag and gazed out to sea. "I believe we shall have another storm soon, Will," he said.

"Yes," replied his cousin. "I don't like the look of the sky. As soon as we have lunch, we will roll up the tent and sail back toward home. If heavy rain sets in, we may not be able to get away for several days, and it is just as well to move while the weather is fine. You will have many more opportunities to add to your collection of shells before you return to Melbourne."

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE PEARLERS.

"Well, how would you like to be a pearler, my boy?" said Mr. Thompson, as he tapped Vernon playfully on the shoulder.

"It must be very interesting work," replied the boy, "but I think I should be afraid to go below the surface of the ocean in one of those clumsy-looking suits."



His gaze wandered along the deck of the lugger where a Japanese diver was dressed in his canvas suit, with the red rubber sleeve cuffs that fitted snugly round his wrists, to keep out the water. Close beside him, a Malay was overhauling the great leaden-soled boots which the diver intended to wear.

Mr. Thompson's largest lugger, "The Coral Queen," was anchored off the Banks Islands, in Torres Strait, and Vernon was quite eager to see the shell the diver would bring from the bottom of the ocean. Just as he turned to see what his cousin was doing, Mr. Thompson spoke again.

"Ah! laddie! you would soon get used to being tied up in one of those suits," he said. "When we get over a shallow reef I'll put you in a suit, and you can have a look at the wonderful gardens at the bottom of Torres Strait."

"Why! are there gardens down there, Uncle?" cried Vernon, in surprise.

"Yes, my boy," replied the pearler, with a smile. "There are very beautiful gardens down there, and a sight of them will stay in your memory as long as you live."

"Then I certainly would like to have a look at them," said Vernon.

"That's right, laddie," replied Mr. Thompson. "You will soon get used to the sensation of being under water. Now, I must see how my diver is getting on."

The Japanese had his great boots on by this time, and was standing on the ladder fastened to the side of the lugger, with the water up to his knees. Mr. Thompson picked up a big copper helmet, to which



was attached a long rubber air line, and placed it over the diver's head. The Japanese grinned at Vernon through the face glass, as the flange of the helmet was screwed to the collar of his suit. Then, the bulging copper head sank slowly as the diver backed down the ladder, step by step, and disappeared under the water. On the deck, two Malays were working the air-pump, while another held a rope to which was attached a net. This was lowered down after the diver, so that he could place the pearl shell in it.

"Are the divers not afraid of sharks, Uncle?" asked Vernon.

"Oh, no," replied Mr. Thompson. "If a shark makes its appearance, the diver releases a little air out of the cuff of his sleeve, and the bubbles scare the big fish away."

"But Will told me last night that a shark once killed one of your divers," said Vernon.

"Ah, yes, but that was different," said Mr. Thompson. "On that occasion my divers were not wearing suits, and one of them was so foolish as to try to bring a crayfish to the surface."

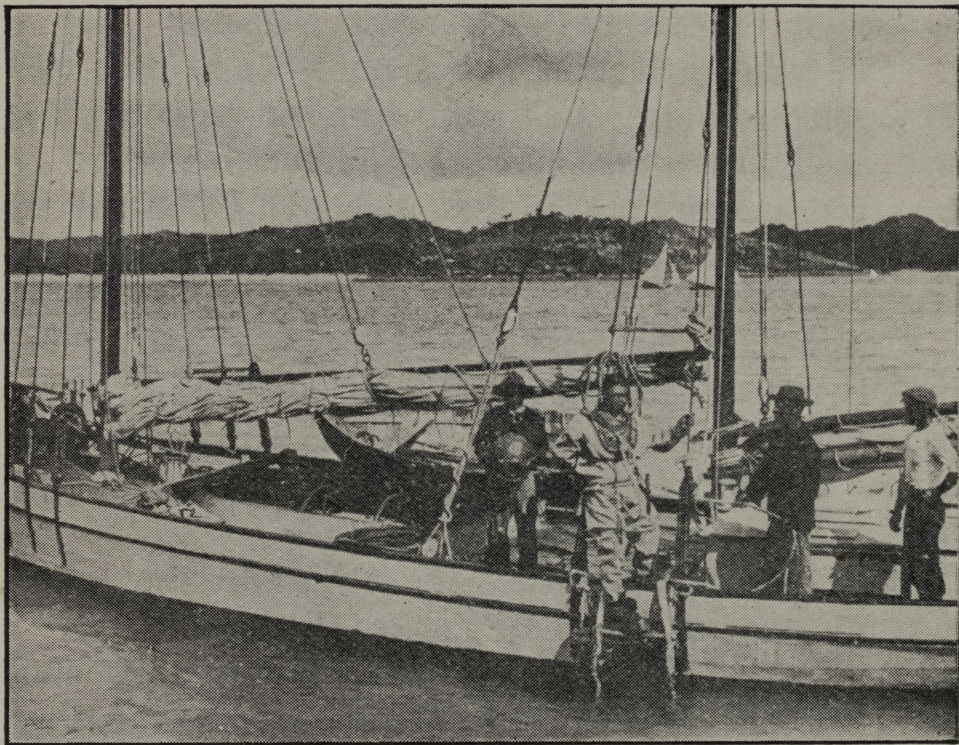
"A crayfish!"

"Yes, the aboriginal Beche-de-mer divers often come across fine crayfish hidden in clefts of the rocks, or in the coral. These fish are a great delicacy when they are brought on board the lugger, but the trouble is to get them there. If a diver is prepared to take the risk of trying to bring one to the surface, it simply resolves itself into a matter of speed. Crayfish is a favorite food with sharks, and, as soon as a diver picks one of them up, a shark will flash



down and try to secure it. My diver was bringing a big crayfish to the surface, when several sharks attacked him. We dragged him on deck, but he was frightfully mangled, and died shortly afterwards."

"But I suppose there are times when the aboriginal divers defeat the sharks, and come to the surface without a scratch," said Vernon.



Diver Ready to Descend.

"Well, yes, if they are armed with a knife," replied the pearler. "But what would you think of a diver who had his head inside a shark's mouth, and yet lived to tell the story?"

"Why, that never happened, did it, Uncle?"

"Yes. Some years back an aboriginal, named 'Treacle' was diving in shallow water near Thurs-



day Island. Suddenly, there was a whirl in the waters around him, and he realized that his head was inside a shark's mouth."

"And what did he do?" asked Vernon.

"He kept punching the shark with both hands, and suddenly the monster opened its mouth and released him."

"But, surely 'Treacle' did not live long after such a terrible experience!" exclaimed Vernon.

"Oh, yes, he is still alive, and, when we visit Thursday Island, I shall point him out to you. You will easily recognise him by the terrible scars on his face and neck. He was in hospital for several months, but a clever doctor managed to patch him up."

"Did he dive again, Uncle?"

"Oh, no! I don't think 'Treacle' would go into the water again for a fortune. It is the same with most of the aboriginal divers. Once they get a fright, they will not again face the water."

"Have you lost other divers while they were searching for pearl-shell?" asked Vernon.

"Yes," said Mr. Thompson. "I was seeking shell near the Aru Islands, in 1912, and a Japanese diver named Yoshama was down in twenty fathoms of water, when his life-line was suddenly wrenched from the hands of the Malay who was holding it on deck. A few seconds later, the air-pipe also parted under the strain, and the diver was a doomed man. His death was caused by a large diamond fish."

"What are they like, Uncle?"

"They are the most delicate and finest-flavored fish in Barrier Reef waters, and, although they are



not vicious, they have a playful habit of using a sort of bone hook, at the end of their fins, to grapple with any object they see in the water. It was this hook that wrenched Yoshama's life and air lines out of the Malay's hands. However, he did not have such a frightful death as Boorabee, another of my aboriginal divers."



Diver Coming Up.

"What happened to him?" eagerly asked Vernon, who was now thoroughly interested in his Uncle's stories of the dangerous creatures that inhabit the pearling waters.

"Well, there are large rock cod-fish at the bottom of these waters, and some of them measure six feet in



length," said the pearler. "Sharks will circle around their prey, several times, before they attack, but these giant cod, who generally hide in coral caverns, will make one dash at a naked diver, and they never miss their object. Boorabee had one of his legs torn off by a cod, and he died soon after he reached the surface. But I am talking like a phonograph, and the diver is sending up a lot of shell. Come and look at it."

There was a big heap of pearl-shells lying on the deck, and Will Thompson, with two Malays, was opening them with short knives to see if they contained any pearls. Mr. Thompson stooped down and picked up something that looked like a small tree.

"Here you are, Vernon," he said. "The diver has sent you up a little present. I told him, before he went down, that you were interested in the mysteries of the deep."

The boy took the marine growth in his hands. It was perfectly black and smooth. "Is it a kind of seaweed, Uncle?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Mr. Thompson. "If you place it in boiling water, you will be able to twist and work it into any shape you like. Malay crews on all pearling luggers are very fond of making bracelets from this material, and your Aunt will give you one of them when we return home."

"Thanks, Uncle," said the boy. "I shall give it to Mother."

"That's right, laddie; always think of your mother, and you won't go far wrong in the battle of life that is before you."



## CHAPTER IV.

## TREASURE OF THE SEA.

"Oh! Uncle, do tell me something about pearl-shell," cried Vernon. "They look just like big oysters."

"Yes, they are oysters, my boy, but you would not find that they were good eating," replied Mr. Thompson. "They take about six years to grow to the size of the shells you see lying on the deck. If they are brought to the surface before that time, they are not of commercial value."

"How does the creature come to be within the shell?"

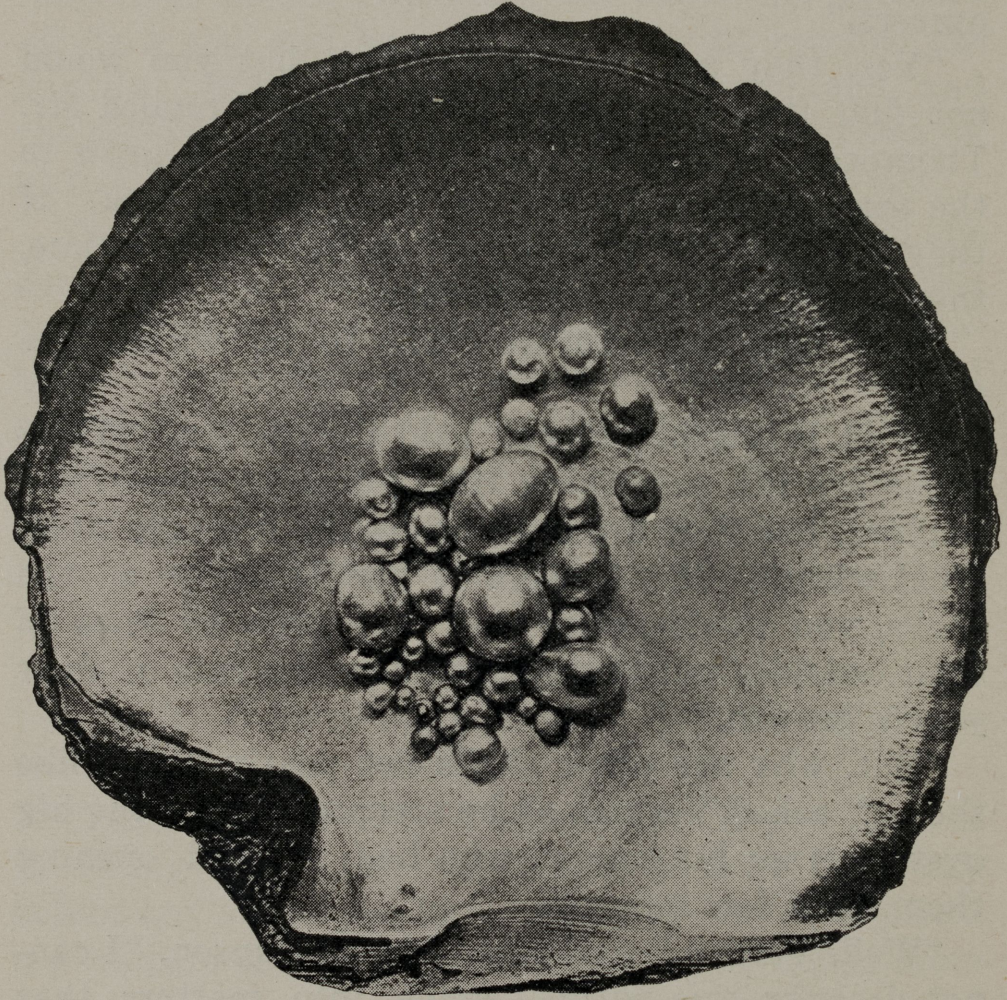
"Well, it is a long story," said the pearler. "Their shells are not something that comes to them from without, but they are built up by the creature itself from within. If you were to handle many of the shells, you would notice that they grow by lines on their outside, and these lines show the rate of their yearly growth."

"But, why are other shells not pearly inside like these?" asked Vernon, as he accepted one of the big oysters from his cousin, who had stopped opening them for a few minutes.

"Well, Vernon," exclaimed Mr. Thompson, "I cannot describe this without going into matters that would hardly interest you. I can only say, briefly, that it is owing to the manner in which the material is put together. You have probably noticed that clear barley sugar, a lump of loaf sugar, the grained appearance of peppermint drops, and the dead white of stick candy are all very unlike in appearance, yet



each is only pure sugar in a different form. In each, the particles of sugar have a different effect upon light. Some sea creatures, in forming their coverings, so deposit the carbonate of lime that builds up



Cluster of Pearls found at Thursday Island.

their shell, that this (in those with the pearly lining) breaks up the light, and shows the various colors of which white light is composed. Do you understand me?"



"Yes, Uncle," replied Vernon, "it is very interesting."

"Well, you have noticed that a crack in a lump of ice will show all the colors of the rainbow, and that a soap-bubble, when it is blown thin, will show most beautiful colors. These examples will give you some idea how the minute particles of shell material, if put together in a certain way, may affect light. The difference, then, between pearl and common shell, is that it is so put together that the pearl breaks up white or common light into colored light. The creature, in making its shell, whether pearly or not, takes great care that the case, or house, in which its soft body intends to live, shall be perfectly smooth and polished."

"But, how is it that there are pearls in some shells and none in others?"

"Ah! I knew that you would ask that question," said the pearler, with a smile. "Well, suppose that by some accident, when the creature has its shell open and is taking in food, a grain of sand falls in and gets between the soft body of the creature and its shell. The creature has no claws, or other aids by which it can rid itself of this unwelcome guest. As it cannot push the sand out, it covers over the irritating substance with its shell material. When the sharp corners of the sand are covered, the creature can get along with the grain as a round, smooth body. Year after year, the oyster gives a new coat to the shell and a covering to its troublesome visitor. In this way, the grain of sand grows and becomes a pearl. All pearls originate in this manner. It is an attempt by the creature to cover up a grain of sand."



or other intruding substance, that it cannot get rid of. Naturally, as it covers the substance with the material with which it builds its shell, only those creatures that have handsome pearly shells will make handsome pearls."

"But pearls have been found in the ordinary oysters we buy in fish-shops, have they not, Uncle?" asked Vernon.

"Oh! yes," replied Mr. Thompson. "But, as the shell of the common oyster is nearly dead white, and very seldom pearly, so the pearls are dead white and of no beauty. It is only in the pearl oyster that we find the most beautiful pearly lining, and, consequently, the most beautiful pearls."

"Do you get many pearls, Uncle?" exclaimed Vernon.

"One in every thousand or so shells we open," replied Mr. Thompson. "Pearls are not as plentiful as some people imagine. Most of the richest pearling beds in Torres Strait are nearly worked out, and, as a result, we are forced to send our divers into very deep water if we want to get good shell."

"But, I suppose you occasionally get a pearl of great value?" said Vernon.

"I have never found anything out of the way in size," replied the pearler. "Still, many valuable pearls have been found in Australian waters. The best-known is the now famous 'Southern Cross Pearl,' which was found in 1874 by a pearler named Clark, near Broome, on the West Australian coast. When the shell was opened, there was found, in its interior, a remarkable pearl cross which measured one and a half inches in length."



"The man who found this wonderful pearl was afraid of it," said Will, who had overheard part of his father's conversation.

"Yes, he was filled with amazement when he saw it," said Mr. Thompson. "He thought it was a miracle from Heaven, and he buried the pearl for



Opening Pearl Shell.

two years. It was afterwards sent to London, where it was exhibited at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1876."

"I once read a story about buried pearls," said Vernon.

"Well, I don't think that you will find any buried pearls in North Queensland," replied Mr. Thompson.



smiling. "However, that reminds me of a fortune in pearls which lies hidden in the ground somewhere on the New Guinea coast. They were concealed by a French sailor named Jacob le Maire, who explored New Guinea in 1615. The natives gave him as many pearls as he cared to accept, and he buried them, as he was afraid of being captured by the Dutch, who also visited the island at intervals. The sailor was afterwards captured by the Dutch, and died at sea. Perhaps, when you leave school, Vernon, you may like to visit New Guinea and search for the Frenchman's hidden treasure?"

"I don't think there would be much chance of finding it, Uncle," exclaimed Vernon. "New Guinea is such a big place!"

"That is so," replied the pearler. "But here is the diver coming to the surface. He has found a lot of shell this morning."

## CHAPTER V.

### GARDENS OF THE SEA.

Vernon was surprised to find how easily the life and air lines came inboard. He did not know, of course, that in the water, despite the heavy boots, and the leaden weights hanging from his shoulders, the Japanese weighed nothing at all. In a moment, the glistening helmet bobbed out of the water, and the diver came up the ladder. Mr. Thompson hastened to unscrew the helmet, and the diver took in great draughts of fresh air as it was lifted off.

"Take off your suit, Shimu," said the pearler.



"This lad here wants to see what the bottom of Torres Strait is like. Help him into the dress."

"Is it a simple matter going down?" asked Vernon.

"As easy as going to dinner," said Mr. Thompson, smiling.

In a few seconds, the diver was helped out of his rubber suit, and Vernon was assisted in. Then the boy was lifted over the side of the lugger, while Mr. Thompson adjusted the tackle and clamped the helmet over his head.

"Keep an even keel now, laddie," cried his uncle, as the helmet, closing tightly, shut Vernon off from the outer world.

The boy hung helplessly, for a few seconds, and felt half-suffocated by the rubber-tainted air which he was now breathing. Before he had become accustomed to his new conditions, his uncle slipped the catch from the tackle, and Vernon splashed heavily into the sea. He had no time to think; but he was conscious of an impression that some accident had occurred, and that he was doomed to feed the monster cod-fish his uncle had told him about. He seemed to be dropping at terrific speed; a blurred mist came over his eyes, his ears buzzed; his head felt as if it must burst, and he took no further interest in anything. Only a few seconds elapsed from the time of his immersion until something struck him on the head, and he became aware that he was lying on a bed of coral.

The regular beating of the pumps, overhead, now sounded plainly through the tubing, and his senses came back to him. But he could not rise to his feet.



He seemed to have lost control of his movements, and his head bobbed like a football on the coral bottom for some time before he managed to stand on his feet. Then he could scarcely believe his eyes. He stood in a forest of graceful, twining coral which swayed gently, as if moved by a breeze. Long streamers of some strange weed floated around him; swarms of funny-looking fishes appeared from the blurred beyond and looked at him with much interest.

Suddenly, Vernon's attention was attracted by the peculiar movements of some fish near him, and he stopped to watch them. There were a great number of small mounds dotted all around, and the fish were disappearing inside these, as if they were houses of some sort. The boy kicked one. It was stuck fast to the bottom, and a fish came to a hole that looked like a doorway, and gazed around in surprise. Then, as he moved toward the mounds, every fish disappeared inside the little houses.

Vernon now turned his attention to several huge flowers, that grew out of the sides of coral. Suddenly, he became interested in one of the plants which was slowly moving across the coral floor.

"Why, it is alive!" he muttered, as he picked up the strange-looking flower.

Then, to his great surprise, he saw that the flower had fixed itself upon the shell of a small crab, and almost covered the back of the creature. He placed the crab on the coral again, and it proceeded on its journey. Oddly enough, the crab did not appear to object to its burden.



"I must ask Uncle what these queer-looking plants are, when I get to the surface," thought Vernon, as he moved over the rough coral.

Presently, the wondering boy noticed jelly-fish of all kinds and shape that were moving lazily in the water around him. Some of them were shaped like an umbrella, but had, in place of a handle, bundles of fleshy tentacles hanging down below, and streamers that reached to a length of several feet. Others were more like saucers, or bowls, and there were some which, like inverted, delicate shrubs, or fairy-seaweed fronds, hung downward.

Vernon was so interested in the movements of the different jelly-fish, that it was some time before he noticed several fish racing swiftly past him. He had not long to remain in doubt as to the strange actions of the fish, for a shark dropped from somewhere, and sailed about, lazily.

For a moment, the boy's heart seemed to stop beating. He was afraid that, if he made any movement, his feet would land him straight on to the shark. The ugly monster now turned its attention to Vernon, and swam around him several times. It was evidently very curious to know what sort of fish he was. At last, the shark came to rest in front of him, and they both glared at each other. All at once, Vernon remembered his signal cord, and jerked it three times. The next instant he was spinning up through the waters like a fish on a hook. The shark evidently thought he was something of that nature, and, after its first start of surprise, followed the boy. But Vernon soon lost sight of the mon-



ster, and it probably went back to chase fish near the coral floor.

The boy had only a hazy memory of being hauled on deck and lifted out of the unwieldy dress.

"Well, laddie, where's your pearl shell?" inquired Mr. Thompson.

"I never thought about shell," Vernon answered, "but I saw some funny flowers that live on the backs of crabs, and a shark that was very interesting, and here is a piece of coral I broke from a tree, and——"

"Hold on, my boy," said his uncle, smiling. "Let me do the talking until you fill your lungs with pure air. Now, those flowers you saw were anemones. Some people, certainly, call them ocean flowers, as they put forth buds and blossoms, but they are animals instead of vegetables. They each have a mouth and a stomach, and, when they wish to open themselves out, they take in a quantity of salt water. When they wish to shut themselves up, they spurt the water out again. Although most anemones attach themselves to rocks and coral, there are others that fix themselves on crabs and shells, and thus ride from place to place at the expense of the creature they are clinging to."

"Well, Vernon," said Will Thompson, "you will see some more of our strange Barrier Reef creatures to-morrow."

"I don't think I should care to go down in a diving suit again," replied Vernon.

Mr. Thompson smiled. "You will not have to do any diving to-morrow," he said. "I am sending Will and one of my aboriginals across to the island in the dinghy, to see if they can harpoon any turtles.



The shell of this animal is very valuable. Now, you can pass away the afternoon in fishing. You should be able to hook some fine bream on this reef, and, if you are lucky, we shall have fried fish for tea."

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE HARPOONER.

After breakfast, next morning, Will and Wamba, the aboriginal, climbed over the side of the lugger and stepped into the dinghy. Shortly afterwards, Vernon took his seat in the stern of the little craft. Two long iron spears lay on the floor of the boat, and each spear had a barbed point. A long coil of rope was fastened to each weapon.

The aboriginal took the oars, and his powerful strokes were soon driving the dinghy through the water at fine speed.

"Wamba is the best harpooner we have ever had," said Will, as he pointed to the aboriginal. "Father thinks a lot of him, and took him down to Sydney last year. But Wamba did not like the city, and fretted until Father came back again. He is a native of Murray Island, and most of the aboriginals from that place can swim like fish."

"Is it not very cruel to kill turtles with those horrible spears?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," replied Will, "but, you see the tortoise-shell we get from the animals is worth a lot of money."

"Why! I always thought tortoise-shell came from tortoises," said Vernon.

"Oh! no," exclaimed his cousin. "There are five



different varieties of turtle in these waters, but it is only the variety known as the Hawk's-bill that supplies us with tortoise-shell. We never touch the others."

"I see you have one end of the spear-line tied to the boat," said Vernon. "What would happen if you harpooned a big turtle, and it dived to the bottom of the sea?"



Carrying Pearl Shell on Board Lugger.

"It rarely happens," answered Will. "If the turtle dives, and we see that there is danger of losing our boat, we cut the rope. Still, we don't like to do that."

"Did you ever see a boat pulled under by a turtle?" asked Vernon.

"Well, yes, I did," replied Will. "When we were



sailing past the Palm Islands last year, we saw two aboriginals in a bark canoe. One of them speared a big turtle, and it raced straight for the open sea and pulled the frail craft through the water at terrific speed. The blacks had no knife to cut the rope, and suddenly the turtle dived. The canoe was pulled under water, and the blacks would probably have been drowned, or taken by a shark, if Father had not gone to their assistance."

Wamba, who had been looking ahead of him every now and then, suddenly handed the oars to Will.

"Big turtle sleeping over there," he said, pointing to a spot where a dark object floated on the surface of the sea, about two hundred yards ahead.

Will began to row very quickly, while the aboriginal picked up one of the harpoons and moved to the bow of the boat. Slowly, the dinghy crept toward the dozing animal. Then Vernon saw Wamba raise the spear. Crash! The sharp point pierced the shell of the turtle, and the animal struggled vainly to release itself from that terrible barb. It was several minutes before the massive prize was hoisted into the boat, but at last the task was effected without a capsizing.

The aboriginal took the oars from Will and pulled the boat toward the beach. On reaching shallow water, the boys assisted Wamba to carry the turtle to a sandy patch of ground, which was some distance from the water's edge.

"Come along, Vernon," cried Will. "We shall look for turtles' eggs while Wamba is removing the shell from that creature. It is dirty work, and you would not like to watch it."



The boys walked slowly over the drift coral and shells, until they came to a raised heap of sand.

"Here we are," cried Will. "I am sure we shall find some eggs under this sand."

Scooping the sand away with his hands, Will presently uncovered about fifty round white eggs, each about the size of a tennis-ball.

"How does such a clumsy creature dig a nest like that?" asked Vernon.

"The female turtle comes ashore at night," answered Will. "With her four flappers she burrows into the ground, until she is almost hidden from view. Then she lays her eggs. Clambering out of the hole again, she fills in the pit, and then crawls down to the sea."

"And I suppose the sun hatches the eggs?" said Vernon.

"Yes," replied Will. "The sun shines upon the patch of sand for many days, and then, one morning, there emerges from the cone several tiny black turtles, each about an inch across. With amazing swiftness, they scurry down to the sea and conceal themselves under a thick patch of weed. Weeks later, when they have grown and their shell has hardened, they leave the weed and swim about in the open sea."

"But do big fish never devour them?" asked Vernon.

"Oh! yes," said his cousin. "Sometimes, a baby turtle strays away from its seaweed home and is then gobbled up by a hungry fish."

"If the fish do not devour some of them, I suppose the sea would be full of turtles?"



"Yes; and during late years, when there have not been so many aboriginals hunting them for food, they have greatly increased in numbers. There is Wamba calling us. He must be ready to return to the lugger. We are coming to the island again in the morning, to get fresh water, and I shall then show you some of our sea birds."

Will covered the eggs again, and both boys



Pearling Fleet, Thursday Island.

hastened down to the dinghy where Wamba was waiting for them. He had placed the big shell at the bottom of the boat, where it resembled an unturned basin.

Half-a-mile from the island, Vernon, who was watching a shoal of flying-fish skimming over the water, suddenly cried:

"Oh! did you see that funny-looking thing come to



the surface of the water, and disappear again. It had a face like an old man."

Both Will and Wamba laughed at the look of astonishment on the boy's face.

"That was a dugong," said his cousin. "You will see plenty of them before we go away."

"Oh! I have heard of them," replied Vernon. "They yield a valuable oil, I am told."

"That's correct," said his cousin. "At one time, the oil, which is used for medicinal purposes, was worth a lot of money, but some dishonest people sold shark oil as dugong, and the fraud resulted in a very decreased demand for the oil."

"How are the animals caught, Will?"

"They are generally harpooned like turtles. They travel in herds which consist of half-a-dozen to thirty or forty animals, and live on a sort of marine grass that grows amongst the coral. The blacks are very fond of the flesh. Indeed, at one time, it was cured by white people and sold as bacon."

"I just hate the thought of going back to the city," said Vernon. "If I remained in North Queensland, I think I would see new and strange creatures every day."

"Well, I don't know so much about that," replied Will. "In a few months' time you would get quite used to seeing our birds and sea creatures, and you might scarcely take notice of them."

"I should never tire of watching the wild life in these parts," declared Vernon. "When I leave school, I think I shall come back and buy a pearling schooner."



Just then the dinghy reached the side of the lugger, and Mr. Thompson, who was leaning over the deck-railing, overheard the boy's words.

"That's right, my boy," he said, smiling. "You and Will can become partners and buy me out. It will then be time for me to retire."

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE ISLE OF BIRDS.

"Vernon wants to get some birds' eggs, Father," said Will, next day, as the boys were about to leave the lugger for the shore. "It is a pity he was not with us when we visited Raine Island, last year."

"Yes, he would have secured a fine collection of sea birds' eggs," replied Mr. Thompson. "It is a wonderful place for birds."

"Is it far away?" asked Vernon.

"About two hundred miles to the south," replied the pearler. "Some people call it the Isle of Birds."

"What a nice name!" said Vernon.

"When we visited the island, last year," continued Mr. Thompson, "almost every foot of ground was covered with old and young birds. Amongst them were Frigate-birds, Boobies, Gannets, Noddies, and Black and White Terns. The only mainland bird I recognized was the Landrail. You would have been interested in the Frigate-birds, Vernon."

"What are they like, Uncle?"

"Well, they are the feathered pirates of tropic seas, and prey upon the earnings of honest birds. I do not mean that they will not fish for themselves, because I have seen them swoop down upon a flying



fish in the air, just like a Hawk swoops upon a small bird. But, unlike other sea birds, they are unable to catch a fish under water or feed upon the water. Although they have webbed feet, I have never seen one swim. Indeed, I have never seen one so much as touch the water."

"Then they are really Sea Hawks, Uncle?"

"Yes, my boy, we can safely call them that. Wamba, here, says that he has seen Frigate-birds take young ones from a nest, and eat them. A friend of mine, who lives on Murray Island, has seen them take, out of a nest, young birds that were almost fully fledged."

"In many ways they very much resemble a Hawk," said Will.

"They certainly have a long, powerful beak that is hooked at the end," replied Mr. Thompson. "They are also amongst the number of the very few sea-birds that rest on trees."

"There's a Booby flying over the water," said Will, as he pointed ahead of the lugger.

"Yes, and it is the Frigate-bird's chief victim," replied Mr. Thompson. "The hen Boobies go forth to secure fish for their young, and, on their way back to their nests, they are robbed by the feathered pirates."

"Tell me more about Raine Island, Uncle," said Vernon. "It must be a very interesting place."

"For a bird-lover, it is certainly one of the most interesting islands within the Barrier Reef," replied Mr. Thompson. "Talking about Frigate-birds reminds me that, when I was there last year, these birds had a small colony for themselves. Their nests



consisted of platforms about a foot high, and in each of the nests was one young bird."

"And did you see any eggs, Uncle?" asked Vernon.

"Why! the island was covered with eggs," said the pearler. "Terns' eggs lay scattered about the ground, without any nest. How each bird found its own nest again, amongst so many, was a mystery to me. Towards night, it was curious to see the long lines of flocks of birds that stream in from all quarters of the horizon towards the island."

"Well, Vernon, it is time that we went ashore for fresh water," said Will. "Father can tell you more about the Isle of Birds when we return."

Both boys stepped into the dinghy, and, half-an-hour later, they were wandering around the island.

"This looks like a place where pirates would have planted gold in the old days," exclaimed Vernon.

"You are not likely to find any hidden treasure on this island," said his cousin. "Still, it is not so many miles from this spot that Mr. Jardine found a small fortune in old gold coins, in 1902."

"Why! I never thought that pirates had sailed in Australian waters," said Vernon.

"I cannot say whether it was pirates' gold," replied his cousin. "One of Mr. Jardine's pearling luggers was caught in a storm, near Murray Island. The crew ran for shelter to a spot known as Boot Reef and the lugger glided, through a narrow channel, into a small basin shut in by walls of coral. The wind continued to blow from the south-east, and prevented them from getting out through the channel. The crew found that the only way to continue their journey was to cut a passage where the coral wall



was narrowest. As they cut, they came on a chest of gold coins that was buried in the coral."

"I wonder how it got there?" asked Vernon.

"That will probably never be known," answered his cousin, "but the old Murray Island natives have a tradition that a ship was wrecked on the reef in the dim past, and that some very dark men (probably Spaniards) came ashore on a raft with a chest of money. They were all murdered by the natives. The chest, found on the reef, was probably left on board by the crew."

"And what became of the chest that was taken ashore?"

"That is another mystery," said Will. "Some time ago, Captain Dabelle, of the Torres Strait pilot service, found some old coins on Murray Island, and these probably came from the missing chest."

Further remarks about the Murray Island treasure were interrupted by Will, who nearly stepped on a nest made from seaweed. Within it lay two bluish eggs, and, as Vernon was examining them, a Cormorant swooped past.

"She doesn't like your interfering with her nest," laughed Will.

Vernon placed the eggs back in the nest, and the boys made their way through a small scrub, within which were scores of orchids. There was something else—something that robbed Vernon of his enthusiasm for seeking birds' nests. Myriads of mosquitoes suddenly attacked them, and, folding their arms over their faces, both boys fled towards the beach again.

"I don't think I'll trouble about those eggs," said



Vernon, ruefully, as he rubbed the parts of his face and neck where the vicious insects had attacked him.

"Mosquitoes frequent most of the scrubs in the interior of these islands," said Will. "The wind cannot penetrate through the thick foliage, and so the insects are not disturbed."

Will led the way to the spot where huge boulders came down to the water's edge. Climbing over these was tiring work, and the boys halted several times. At last, Will placed his hand in a small crevice, and drew forth an egg which he handed to his cousin.

"Here is a Sooty Tern's nest," he said. "You will notice that it is composed of only a few dead leaves. I don't think that we should rob the bird of her solitary egg. She would probably waste hours in searching for it."

As the boys had still to fill several tins with fresh water, they returned to the dinghy. The water had to be carried from a well several yards up from the water's edge, and darkness was closing over the coral sea when they returned to the lugger.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### PERILS OF THE RIVERS.

Three weeks had passed since Will and Vernon had returned from the pearling grounds. Mr. Thompson had taken his cargo of pearl-shell to Thursday Island, and, as he intended to proceed from that port to distant pearling grounds, near the Aru Islands, and would be away for a month, the boys had stayed at home.



Vernon was displaying his array of shells to Mrs. Thompson, and that kindly old lady appeared to take a keen interest in the boy's collection.

"Before you go home I will give you several nice pieces of staghorn coral, and ornaments which the aborigines have carved from tortoise-shell," said Mrs. Thompson.

"I shall have a splendid collection of Barrier Reef shells, Auntie," said the delighted boy.

"Yes, Vernon, and they look lovely when they are in a glass case."

"How would you like a few crocodile's teeth?" said Will, as he came around the side of the house, with a rifle under his arm.

"I wish you would leave those hideous brutes alone," said Mrs. Thompson. "Whenever you hunt them, I am afraid that something will happen to you."

"Oh, there's no need to worry, Mother," said Will. "The crocodile that catches me will have to get up early in the morning."

"I am not so sure about that," said Mrs. Thompson. "The aborigines well know the habits of crocodiles, yet how many of them have been killed by the reptiles!"

"Yes, Mother, but the blacks will persist in wading into the water at night, to spear fish," replied Will. "The crocodiles hear the barking of their dogs, and it attracts them to the spot."

"Well, if you are going to the river, keep your eyes open," cautioned Mrs. Thompson. "One of the blacks, who came here yesterday, said that he saw a big crocodile basking on the sand, near Eel Water-



hole. You may be able to get a shot at the brute."

"Very well, Mother," cried Will. "Come along, Vernon; I'm going after that crocodile, and, if he shows himself, I'll wager that I shall not miss him."

The boys had to walk three miles through the bush before they came to Eel Waterhole. It was a deep pool at the bend of the river, and, as Will explained, it was a favorite haunt of the man-eating crocodile. Several aborigines and cattle had disappeared at this spot, and Will once saw a wallaby, that had come to the bank to drink, pulled under the water by one of the ugly-looking reptiles.

"These crocodiles are very fond of dogs," said Will, as he halted under a tree for a rest. "If you were to throw a dead dog into the river, to serve as bait, you would be sure to get a shot. I have heard stories about cruel people who have tied dogs to trees in order that their yelps would bring a crocodile to the surface. Dogs know the danger full well, and suffer agonies of terror."

"I cannot imagine how people can be so cruel," said Vernon.

"The blacks who live near rivers and creeks up this way, have told me that very often crocodiles will prowl around their camps at night, after their dogs," continued Will. "The reptiles are also very fond of fish and land-crabs, and they often devour horses and cattle that come to the stream to drink."

"Are there any alligators up here, Will.?" asked Vernon.

"There are no alligators in Australia," replied Will. "We have two different species of crocodiles—the man-eater, and another kind which inhabits



fresh-water creeks and lives on fish. This smaller one will not interfere with human beings or large animals such as horses or cattle."

After a short rest, both boys again proceeded on their way, and eventually came to the banks of the river. Jutting from the bank into the middle of the river was a wide sandbank, but, to Will's surprise, no crocodiles were to be seen.

"It is early yet," he said, "and perhaps one of the brutes will come out of the water when the sun is directly overhead. They like to expose themselves to the warm sunshine."

It was very still amongst the trees which fringed the river bank. Every now and then a fish flopped into the water, and from the distance came the "Hoo-hoo" of the Torres Strait pigeon. These were the only sounds that disturbed the silence. Vernon was dozing under the shade of a wide-spreading tree, when his cousin gripped him tightly by the arm.

"Keep quiet!" he whispered.

The boy pointed toward the river, where Vernon saw a big crocodile that lay on the sand. It seemed as inert as a log, and looked very much like one. But for the wicked twinkle in its black, beady eyes, one could hardly have told that it was alive.

Will crept slowly forward. When he was as close as he thought he could go, without scaring the reptile, he raised his rifle and took careful aim. Then he pulled the trigger, and the report was followed by the welcome sound of the hideous beast clashing its jaws and wallowing round on the sand in its death-throes.



Vernon jumped up and raced forward, but his cousin quickly stopped him.

"Don't go near him yet," he cautioned. "You want to make sure that he is dead. A single blow from a crocodile's tail can break a man's leg, and a bite from those big jaws, with their grinning fangs, might be more serious still."

Presently, the wriggling animal lay still, and the boys walked across the sand to the spot where it was lying. The brute measured about twelve feet. The bullet had entered just under its forearm and passed right through the body.

"We will leave it here," said Will. "I will get the blacks to drag it up on the bank this afternoon. They will cut it up, as they are very fond of the tail, which they roast on hot coals. They will bring the head and skin to the house, and you can take them back with you to Victoria, as a trophy of a day's adventure on a North Queensland river."

Walking slowly along the river bank, and searching under every shrub, Will called Vernon's attention to a heap of leaves, from which issued a musky smell.

"You are in luck's way," he said. "Here is a crocodile's nest."

"What! Surely big brutes like that don't lay eggs?" exclaimed Vernon.

"Oh! yes, they do," replied his cousin, as he threw the leaves to one side, and exposed a layer of eggs. "You see, the reptile's eggs are about as large as those of a goose. The female crocodile scratches a hole in the sand with her paws, and places a layer of eggs at the bottom. Then she scratches some



sand, dry leaves, and grass over them, smoothes it, and deposits a second clutch upon them. These eggs are covered in a similar way, and another lot is deposited, until the mother crocodile has laid from fifty to sixty eggs."

"How do the young ones get on when they are hatched?" asked Vernon.

"The mother always stays near the nest, and, when the sun hatches the eggs, leads the young ones to the water, and takes care of them until their limbs are sufficiently strong and their scales firm. Then the young crocodiles are able to roam the water without assistance."

Vernon placed two of the eggs in his pocket, and Will destroyed the others. Then the boys turned their faces toward home.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE END OF THE HOLIDAY.

"Well, you know, Vernon, all good things must come to an end," said Mrs. Thompson, as she watched the boy packing his collection of Barrier Reef trophies.

"I know that, Auntie," replied Vernon, "but I've had such a delightful time up here that I hate to leave you all."

"Oh! you can come back here again when you leave school," exclaimed Will, who was assisting his cousin to store away his treasures.

"Yes, I've made up my mind to be a pearler when I leave school," said Vernon.

"By that time, somebody may have invented a



diving suit that will stand a greater pressure of water, and enable our divers to search for shell in deeper water," replied Will.

"I know a clever boy who lives near our place," said Vernon. "He says he is going to be an inventor when he leaves school, so I'm going to ask him to make a new diving suit."

A big surprise was in store for Vernon before he left his Uncle's home. During the previous week, Mr. Thompson's pearling luggers had returned from the Aru Islands, and the crews had gone to Thursday Island, to rest. Wamba, the aboriginal, had gone inland for a few days to see some of his dusky friends, and had returned the evening before Vernon's departure. In his hand he carefully carried a grass basket. Handing this to Vernon, he said, with a broad grin: "Me been findum plenty egg for your c'lection. I been search all the time, day and night—no sleep. Me close up finish, mine thinkit."

Mrs. Thompson laughed heartily.

"Well, Wamba, you rascal, you don't look as if you had gone without your sleep," she said. "I suppose you went to one of the camps, and got the children to find the eggs for you."

Wamba grinned again, and went down to the beach where Mr. Thompson was splicing some rope.

"Oh! What a lovely lot of eggs," said Vernon, as he withdrew them from the basket. "I don't like taking them, but there are so many birds here that I suppose they will not be missed. Will, you must let me know the species to which they belong."

"That will not be a hard task," said his cousin.



"Let us pack away the shells first, and then we shall attend to the eggs."

It was late that night before the last box was packed, and Vernon was asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. When Will aroused him, early next morning, he declared that he had only been asleep a few minutes.

After breakfast, there were tears in his eyes as he said good-bye to his Aunt. Mr. Thompson and Will were to accompany him to Thursday Island, on the lugger, and he was to catch the coastal steamer for the South.

He stood on the deck of the lugger until the house on the beach was a mere speck in the distance. However, as the boat sailed through the reef-strewn waters, his resolve to return to North Queensland grew stronger than ever.

Now we must leave Vernon and his adventures in the waters within the Great Barrier Reef. Back in his Victorian home, he will always have his collection of shells and eggs to gaze at. Fortune may not permit his return to the Far North, but his treasures will always remind him of the delightful holiday he once spent amongst the Toilers of the Reef.

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